

Catcher in the Rye

The Purdie Gallery is the latest twist in **David Purdie's** already exciting career. As if huge advertising commissions and editorial work weren't enough, he's now 'discovered' south coast landscapes...

WORDS: BEN HAWKINS PICTURES: DAVID PURDIE





Turn the page
for more of
David's images



About David Purdie

David is best known as an advertising and editorial photographer

with a fine art background, having studied at the Royal College of Art. He's just opened The Purdie Gallery in Rye, East Sussex. To see more, visit www.purdiegallery.co.uk

David Purdie might be an artist by profession, but the need to earn 'proper' money swiftly led him to photography. Book covers, business meetings, men pointing at filing cabinets... good, solid work but a far cry from painting. Years later, after a chance meeting with an agent, he signed up and started to land more creative advertising jobs. And that could have been that. Except David had always planned for a midlife crisis. Instead, he moved to the south coast and opened The Purdie Gallery in the rather Bohemian town of Rye...



"It looks like the Wild West but this guy was on a track behind the beach huts in Hastings. I must give him a print..."

"This is the fleet of trawlers that works from the beach at Hastings. The orange sky is a result of street lights on low cloud. Everyone thinks I did some brilliantly clever lighting job!"



"It seemed like the most obvious thing to do," says David. "We moved a year or so ago, found a shop quite quickly, haggled hard, and we've been preparing ever since. Posters, greeting cards, signed prints... it'll mostly be my stuff but the plan is to show other people's work as well." In the meantime, David is adorning his gallery walls with his own landscapes. "They're a totally new discipline for me, although I treat them in the same way as I treat my other work in terms of the arrangement of elements. I'm not that romantically attached to landscapes, it's more, 'Ooh, there's some stuff, I wonder what that'd look like as a picture'."

David's rather pragmatic approach is largely self-taught. While he studied photography at art college, he was never taught actual technique. "That would have cramped our creativity," he laughs. "It was more, 'Here's a camera, go and

express yourself... and try not to put it in the fixer first'." He learned his trade the old-fashioned way, on the job, and picked up a lot of advice from assistants. "For a long time I stumbled along, doing work that was neither terribly satisfying nor terribly lucrative. I then met up with a couple of photographers who were much more successful than me, and I suddenly started to think that I should be taking this much more seriously, that I should aim a bit higher. We used to let our house out for location work, and Julie from Mutton Bones [David's agent]

came along to one of the shoots, and so I thought, 'I should be working in advertising, I'm perfectly capable of doing this stuff'."

By this point, David had already dipped his toes into the murky world of editorial photography, and had seen several projects published in various Sunday supplements. "The first thing I had published was dumped cars in East London – there was an absolute spate of them about five years ago. I was shooting them on a Fuji GSW69 rangefinder, often at night, nice



"For a long time I stumbled along... then I met some photographers who were more successful than me and I started to take it much more seriously"



RUST IN PEACE



David's cover story for *The Independent Magazine* documented the capital's dumped car craze. "This was a double dump," says David of his van shot. "Full of old tyres, then dumped yards from the 2012 Olympic site."



black & white shots. I took them to *The Independent Magazine*, who don't pay well but do have a good reputation, and they ran it as a cover story. I thought, 'This is it, I don't have to wait for them to give me work'. If anything interesting came along I just did it. It didn't all get published – there's one that I'm very proud of, of an amateur football team, which has never seen the light of day."


You'd imagine the leap from artist to advertising photographer to be quite prohibitive, but by all accounts David's credentials struck a chord with ad agencies. And, as pixel counts and software capabilities have increased, so too has the industry's expectations. "The Arsenal shoot (see page 97) was a hugely complicated thing," he says, referring to a newly completed commission. "The tube platforms alone were about 60 shots comped together, then there's one for each player and one for the football. There are probably 75 shots in total. The final files, with all the layers, were about 2GB each."

So not only is David a Photoshop expert – "I've been using it since version 4 and it's almost second nature to me now" – he's also a director of sorts, overseeing huge

photo shoots. "Big advertising jobs throw assistants at it because they're relatively cheap and you can't be wandering off to get a sandwich halfway through. You're there to work. For the Arsenal shoot we had two regular assistants, a lighting engineer, the producer and her assistant, and make-up." And, in true Hollywood style, there are also the celebrities to deal with. "If you act like it's not a big deal, they'll feel like it's not a big deal. And don't suck up to them – I've photographed politicians and the trick is to behave like you're on their level, just be normal. We were lucky with the footballers – we shot them at the training ground without their agents." Search for 'Arsenal new kit' on YouTube and you'll find a few clips of David mid-shoot with the likes of Theo Walcott.

So is David a naturally bossy person? Or does he have to become David the Director? "No, I'm reasonably bossy anyway," he laughs. "You should be in charge because you're the one who knows how it's all going to work, and if you're not the whole thing's just going to drift away. To begin with, because they're paying you a lot of money, I thought that you had to do





"These crushed cars were at Tilbury Docks in the Thames Estuary. Once I explained what I was doing, the guy working the crane kept picking up cars and theatrically hurling them to the ground. It was great!"

"A manky old camera..."

David's first camera was a Contax II rangefinder, "which by then was a manky old camera that no-one was interested in." He then switched to a Nikon FM and, as he turned pro, assembled a bag full of Nikon kit. "I went digital with the Canon EOS-1Ds," he says, "which seemed to get rid of a lot of fannying around with different formats, going from eight different formats for the previous job to just one for the next. I now use a Canon EOS 5D with the 1Ds as a back-up, although I rent 1Ds Mark II's for larger advertising jobs."



Above and right: David Hockney and AA Gill get stuck into some drawing at Tate Britain, shot for *The Sunday Times*. "It was hard to resist joining in," says David. "Hockney's agent swept up his drawing as we left, so no souvenir!"



what they want, but a lot of people don't want that. They'd rather you tell them what you're going to do to achieve the effect, or to get what you're good at doing. By all means ask what they think occasionally, but don't keep running to them saying, 'How am I doing?' Besides, it pays well because they expect you to be prepared. For the Arsenal job I did three run-throughs – at home against my garden fence, one at the tube station, then one the day before the shoot. I knew exactly what was needed so that when the players turned up, I didn't have to change a thing. The film crew is a good analogy as we're all working towards the same goal, and the larger shoots balance out the solitude of the landscape shoots."

Which brings us neatly back to Rye and The Purdie Gallery. David plans to devote as much time as possible to his south coast exploits, although the advertising work hasn't been sidelined just yet. "I'll do it when it comes in," he says. "My other regular line is with *The Sunday Times Magazine*, and my last job with them was David Hockney and AA Gill at Tate Britain." For the record, Hockney was a "really lovely man" and not the cantankerous old sod you might imagine.

Ask David to define his style and it's perhaps no surprise that he mixes both artistic and photographic analogies. "It's the painter's way of doing it... it's a bit more like drawing... a lot of people look for juxtapositions, events and moments, I tend not to be doing that. I don't take pictures particularly quickly – I'll amble around, or take a shot on the compact, print it out and go back. Some of the landscapey stuff, a lot of them are panoramic comps. I'll load them up, have a look, and if there are any that I think are great but not quite there I'll probably go

and re-shoot. I do masses of layers in Photoshop, usually 10-15 per shot, plus dodging and burning. I also leave work for a few days and come back more objective. It's like a painter looks at his work in a mirror, or turns it upside-down, or looks at it from 400 yards away – you look at it differently so you can see it with fresh eyes. But you can't really do that with a screen, you've got to give yourself time."

David's taken a calculated risk in opening The Purdie Gallery, but the response so far has been overwhelmingly positive, and visitors to Rye will be hard pushed not to notice the new arrival. "The general public seem much better disposed towards photography than I'd expected," he says. "Plus, the gallery is right in the middle of the high street so you can't miss it!" Next time you're in the area, pop in for a chat... ■



What's in a name?

"It was originally going to be called the Obscure Gallery," says David, "which I quite liked, but a few people thought it was too arty. The Purdie Gallery sounded stupid to me, as it's my name, but people who aren't called Purdie think it's a good name. Also, there are no complications – we've been able to buy the .com and .co.uk addresses."

Under the influence

"Since I've started to take photography more seriously, the person I always think of is Garry Winogrand, an American photographer. It's partly his approach I like – he once said that he photographs things simply to see what they'd look like in photos. It's not really about what's out there, it's about what's hanging on the wall, or in a book, because it's only a version of what's out there. I've always been very sympathetic to that approach."